

State, Society and Political Institutions in Revolutionary Ethiopia

Christopher Clapham

Though evidently sharing many features of the common Third World experience, Ethiopia is distinguished from virtually all other African states (though not from a number of Asian ones) by a pattern of state formation and a consequent dynamic of potential change which are overwhelmingly indigenous rather than colonial in origin. It is further distinguished from most (though again not all) Third World states by its commitment since the 1974 revolution to a Marxist-Leninist political trajectory, which especially since the creation of the Workers' Party of Ethiopia (WPE) in 1984, has led to the creation of formal political institutions consciously derived from Soviet models. One obvious concern in discussing Ethiopia must therefore be for the relevance and applicability of such models to the current circumstances of the Third World. This is an exercise from which some useful conclusions can be drawn. Yet generalisation must be approached with caution. Ethiopian socialism (no less than Soviet, Chinese or Cuban socialisms) is marked by distinctive features which must be ascribed to its local setting. With that in mind, I shall look first at the bases of Ethiopian statehood, then at the process of revolutionary transformation which has led to the creation of the present institutional structure, and finally at the problems faced by this structure in responding to the all too evident crisis of the Ethiopian state and economy.

Origins of State and Revolution

Ethiopia is virtually unique in Africa in possessing a tradition of the state which long predates the colonial era. While most African societies (including, of course, several peoples subsequently incorporated into Ethiopia) were governed through political systems based on a mythology of descent from a common ancestor (and describable, despite the enormous variety of political arrangements to which this gave rise, as 'tribal'), Ethiopia has long been governed through a hierarchical political structure based ultimately on the control of territory. For many centuries this hierarchy was headed by an emperor whose membership of a specific 'Solomonic' dynasty was regarded as of critical importance. But the survival of the state after the dynasty's collapse, and most significantly its revival and expansion from the reign of Tewodros (1855-68) onwards, demonstrate

that this state was no mere dynastic creation, but was, rather, deeply rooted in the social and economic structures of the people who comprised it. Uniquely in sub-Saharan Africa, moreover, it was a literate society, with its own written language through which the historical tradition of statehood could be transmitted.

Nor, still more remarkably, was it an ethnic state. The key role of Amhara culture in the Ethiopian political system, including the use of Amharic as the language of government and the special status (until the revolution) of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church, has led many observers to view Ethiopia as a state created and maintained by the simple imposition of 'Amhara domination' over subordinate (or internally colonised) peoples. It is a picture that resistance movements directed against the central government have been understandably eager to emphasise. But it is true only in a limited sense. Ethiopia has (like the United States) a dominant culture, to which anyone ambitious for a place in the state apparatus, and especially for national political power, must to some degree assimilate. This culture likewise reflects the historically pre-eminent position of a particular group, which gains considerable advantages not just from its familiarity with the language of government, but from personal contacts, cultural identities and other affinities with the political system. But the system is not ethnically exclusive. It has invariably included non-Amharic speakers, the most significant of whom in historical terms, the Tigrinya speakers of the northern plateau, can claim to be the founders of the state itself; and positions of the highest political power have been open to individuals of any group who have been prepared to associate themselves with the central government.¹

This ethnic non-exclusiveness has been essential to the survival of the Ethiopian state, particularly as it has expanded to incorporate new peoples since the later nineteenth century, and as the centres of political and economic power have shifted steadily southwards. The price it has paid — and it has been a very heavy one — has been the progressive marginalisation of peoples, especially in Eritrea and Tigray, who would once have viewed themselves as part of the historically dominant core. This has proved much more of a problem for the revolutionary regime than the management of other peoples — Oromo, Sidama,

Wollamo, Kaffa, even Afar and Somali — who were incorporated into the Ethiopian state a century or less ago.

This Ethiopian state has shared the interests of states everywhere. As a hierarchy of control, manned by officials who maintain themselves by extracting a surplus from the directly productive areas of the economy, it has an interest in retaining (and if possible expanding) its territory; in extending its degree of effective control over the people within its frontiers; and in maintaining the external political and economic linkages which are essential both to surplus extraction (which in Ethiopia, as in other parts of Africa, depends to a large extent on state control of external trade), and to importing the manufactured goods (notably armaments) which are needed for central control and elite satisfaction. The modernising emperors who ruled Ethiopia from 1855 to 1974, nonetheless, could not fully achieve their state-creating goals, any more than French kings or Russian czars could achieve theirs, because of the inherent limitations placed on them by the nature of the political structures through which they had to rule. The imperial regime failed because it could establish neither the political nor the economic and military/administrative conditions required for state transformation.

The most important failure was political. John Markakis has correctly identified the exclusion from the state of new professional elites geared to government as the key to the formation of separatist movements throughout the Horn of Africa, including notably those in Eritrea, Ogaden and Southern Sudan;² but the same applies to those who launched the 1974 revolution in Addis Ababa itself. Though the imperial regime provided employment for well-educated young men (the leading positions, even so, being largely reserved for those who had connections with the court), it had no mechanism for meeting their political aspirations, of the kind that was furnished by the anti-colonial nationalist movements in other parts

Much of this contribution draws on my book, *Transformation and Continuity in Revolutionary Ethiopia* (Cambridge, 1988) and sources noted in the book are not footnoted here. This text was revised for publication in December 1989.

¹ If this seems disputable, it may be helpful to consider when last an ethnic Amhara held the supreme position in the Ethiopian state. Mengistu Haile-Mariam, though his origins are uncertain, is generally regarded as of Wollamo parentage (at least on his father's side), from northern Sidamo or southern Shoa. He was preceded by an Oromo, Teferi Benti (1974-77), who in turn took over from an Eritrean, Aman Andom (1974). Nor could even Haile-Selassie (1930-74) be regarded as unequivocally Amhara: he was more Oromo than anything else, with elements of Amhara and Gurage. Zawditu (1916-30) and Menilek (1889-1913) had probably the best claims to Amhara ethnicity, though again with Oromo elements, while Iyasu (1913-16) identified himself strongly with his father's Wollo Oromo people. Yohannes (1872-89) was Tigrayan. It is scarcely possible to find an unequivocally Amhara ruler of Ethiopia in the last 120 years.

² See J. Markakis, *National and Class Conflict in the Horn of Africa* (Cambridge, 1987).

of Africa. The absence of political parties likewise deprived the regime of any effective mechanism through which it could link the government in Addis Ababa to the vast mass of the population, especially in the countryside. This failure was most obvious in Eritrea, but only because Eritrea already had a party structure of a kind that did not exist anywhere else in Ethiopia, having been politically mobilised first by Italian colonialism, and then by the conflicts over the political future of the territory after the Second World War. But exactly the same gap existed throughout the country, and was shown up by incidents such as the Wako rebellion in Bale,³ or the revolt over agricultural income tax in Gojjam.⁴ The absence of political links, and the restriction of government to a small coterie closely centred on the court in Addis Ababa, in turn reduced the state's effectiveness as a developmental or distributive agency — a failure most sharply illustrated by its incapacity to react to the 1973-74 famine in Wollo.

These combined failures provide the classic conditions for revolution, especially in decaying agrarian monarchies faced by the challenge of modern state formation; and Ethiopia found itself in this respect, as in many others, in the mainstream of revolutionary political change. There are, however, two very different ways in which such change can be brought about.⁵ On the one hand, it may be possible for the old regime, undermined by its loss of political legitimacy and effectiveness, to be overthrown by an uprising in the national capital, and displaced by a government of the revolutionary intelligentsia, which then puts through the measures such as land reform which are needed to extend the new system to the countryside. This is the experience of France and Russia, and in a variant form of Iran. On the other hand, if the existing regime is capable of retaining control over the centre, the revolutionary elite may start by organising the peasantry and through guerrilla warfare, establish the control over the countryside from which they can surround and capture the capital; this is, of course, the experience of China, echoed in Vietnam, Kampuchea, Cuba and Nicaragua. The major tragedy of revolutionary Ethiopia has been that it has experienced both simultaneously.

Accordingly, I would regard both the present Ethiopian government, which gained power through the first of these mechanisms, and insurgent movements such as the EPLF and TPLF which are seeking to gain power through the second, as different and opposed elements of the same revolution. This is a viewpoint which would be strongly contested by both

³ *Ibid.*, pp.198 & seq.

⁴ See P. Schwab, *Decision-making in Ethiopia* (London, 1972) pp.158-69; J. Markakis, *Ethiopia: Anatomy of a Traditional Polity* (Oxford, 1974) pp.376-87.

⁵ See S. P. Hutchinson, *Political Order in Changing Societies* (New Haven, 1968) ch.5.

sides, each of which seeks to present itself as the sole authentic representative of revolutionary change. But not only do both the Ethiopian government and its opponents spring from the same initial conditions; they likewise share the same ideology, the same basic goals, and many of the same policies and organisational techniques. The key goal, in each case, is the creation of a hierarchical, efficient and centrally directed state — a Jacobin or Leninist ideal, in which popular participation is welcomed only in so far as it can be harnessed to organised central power.

The Leninist Model

Ethiopia has since 1974, and especially since the creation of the WPE in 1984, made the most sustained attempt by any African state to create a Marxist-Leninist structure of government along broadly Soviet lines. This enterprise has often been criticised, from the left no less (in fact, generally more) than from the right, as the brutal imposition of an autocratic military dictatorship, using a largely meretricious Marxist rhetoric — a charge summed up in John Markakis' widely cited phrase, 'garrison socialism'.⁶ Much of this criticism is justified. The Ethiopian regime does indeed have a substantial military element in its top leadership, and has readily resorted to force as a response to the chronic economic and political problems which it has faced — and which its own rigidly centralist attitude has often exacerbated. But it is not enough to use this as a pretext for dismissing the Ethiopian experience as a serious attempt to apply 'socialist' solutions to the peculiarly intractable problems facing African states. It may be more helpful, indeed, to regard socialism (in its Leninist form) as a doctrine specially apposite to state consolidation in the Third World, which may be expected to appeal to elites whose primary goal is the creation of a centralised and disciplined structure of political control. This is of course a goal which the military, as the most hierarchically organised section of the state bureaucracy, may be expected to share. The problems of revolutionary state consolidation in Ethiopia, along with many of its achievements, must be ascribed at least in part to the Leninist model itself.

That military rulers do not more often use Leninism as a tool for state formation may be due, not so much to the unacceptability of the goal, as to the difficulty of reconciling this means of achieving it with the military's existing interests and alliances. Military regimes which depend on Western (and especially American) support readily regard 'communism' as the arch-enemy. They may be engaged in warfare against guerrilla opposition movements which draw their inspiration from Marx, and look to anti-communism as an ideological prop to their own nationalist

mission. The officer corps often have strong links with social classes whose interests are the first to be threatened by a Leninist ideology which seeks to centralise economic power in the hands of the state. And a Leninist party structure undermines the institutional autonomy of the military itself, which must be subordinated to the control of the party apparatus in a way which undercuts the military command.

All of these obstacles stood in the way of a Leninist military regime in Ethiopia. The Ethiopian military's longstanding dependence on the United States was reinforced, at the time the revolution broke out in 1974, by heavy Soviet support for Ethiopia's main regional rival, the Somali Republic. The insurgency in Eritrea, supported by radical Arab states with Cuban assistance and the indirect backing of the Soviet Union, was articulating an increasingly Marxist rationale for its struggle for separate independence. The army, whose members had been regularly rewarded over the previous century with grants of land in the conquered territories of the south and west, had an evident interest in maintaining the highly exploitative relations of production which this system of land tenure created.

In the hands of the revolutionary regime, Leninism nonetheless provided a means to consolidate and extend the power of the state, while divorcing it from the bankrupt formula of absolute monarchy which had previously been used to sustain it. Though the outcome of the revolution was at one level the result of bloody power struggles between contending groups and individuals, it also represented, at the level of consciousness, an effective synthesis between a historical tradition of the state which was most strongly entrenched in the military, and a means to implement a conception of centralised state power which could be viewed through the prism of Marxism-Leninism as rational, progressive and above all scientific. The extraordinary determination with which the Ethiopian military regime and its Marxist civilian allies sought to create an institutional structure based on broadly Soviet models was thus derived, not merely from an immediate need for Soviet military aid, but from a 'longue duree' of political evolution which Ethiopia shared with no other state in Africa. To this end, the military reversed its superpower alliance (exposing itself in the process to the Somali invasion of 1977-78), took over the ideology associated with its secessionist enemies, pushed through a series of far-reaching reforms which destroyed the economic base of the aristocratic and landholding classes, and created a Leninist vanguard party which is rather more than a mere front for the maintenance of military dictatorship. Though the regime's overriding goal is, as under Haile-Selassie, the maintenance and extension of a centralised

⁶ See J. Markakis, *National and Class Conflict* . . . chs. 8-9.

Ethiopian state, the revolutionary transformation of the means to achieve this goal deserves rather greater recognition than it has usually received.

This transformation consisted in three interlocking elements, through which the new regime sought to create the intermediary institutions between central political power and the social and economic base which had been so evidently inadequate under its predecessor: firstly, the establishment of a new structure of institutional control; secondly, the drastic reorganisation of the economic basis of state power; and thirdly, a selective widening of political representation. All of these ends were systematically and (for the most part) sincerely pursued, and contributed to the vast extension of state power and effectiveness which had taken place since the revolution. All likewise contained flaws which help to explain the current crisis of the Ethiopian state.

Institutional Transformation

The revolutionary regime could, as already noted, draw on the powerful tradition of statehood which had enabled the central Ethiopian highlands to sustain a recognisable political structure over a period of some two thousand years, and preserve Ethiopia's independence through the colonial scramble for the continent. The revolution resulted in the transformation of a previously largely personal set of relationships, within a characteristically feudal structure of deference and subordination, into institutional relationships of much greater complexity and effectiveness. But the new regime did not have to cope with the problem of creating either the state itself, or the attitudes to authority which sustained it.

The key base-level institutions of revolutionary Ethiopia are the peasants' associations and the urban dwellers' associations (or *kebelles*), which were both established as agencies of local self-administration, replacing mechanisms for rural and urban control which had been destroyed by the great revolutionary reforms of 1975. The rural land reform, which abolished all private land ownership and the private hire of agricultural labour, could only be implemented through an organisation which allocated land within a given area (notionally of 800 hectares, but in practice very variable) among the peasant families which farmed it. The urban land reform, which abolished privately rented housing, likewise required an organisation to allocate housing and collect rents on a communal basis.

These two institutions have now become so firmly established that their disappearance is inconceivable, regardless of what further upheavals Ethiopia may yet have to suffer. They were given from the start a wide range of administrative functions in addition to the basic ones for which they were established, and these

have steadily been added to, as each new government programme calls on them for its local level implementation. Every urban house is numbered and registered. The *kebelle* provides (and can, as a punishment, take away) the ration cards which families in major towns need to buy their allocation of subsidised food. It has its own administrative headquarters, its judicial tribunal, its shop, and its women's and youth organisations. It provides the structure through which to run aid projects and literacy campaigns, to get out the crowd for obligatory demonstrations, and to enforce military conscription. Its armed guards police the streets at night, enforce the curfew and help to make Ethiopian cities remarkably free from violent crime.

The peasants' association provides a similar range of services, with additional responsibilities imposed by the requirements of control over the rural economy. Its most important function is to allocate the basic economic resource, land, among its member families. It may also select families in eroded highland areas for resettlement in the south and west, and serves as the basic unit for the villagisation programme, under which scattered homesteads are being concentrated in villages laid out on a uniform grid — a process which brings peasants much more directly under the control of their associations. And while *kebelles* supervise the distribution of food to their inhabitants, peasants' associations have the much less popular task of extracting quotas of grain from farmers at government controlled prices.

While pre-revolutionary landlords and local governors had a position which depended to a large extent on their personal status, the role of *kebelle* and peasants' association chairmen is more directly created by state power. They are therefore more easily displaced, and more amenable to incorporation into an administrative hierarchy. Initially, they had a good deal of autonomy, but since the end of the terror in 1978 they have become government agents under an electoral veneer. *Kebeles* are grouped into 'highers' (or *keftenyas*), and in the largest cities, zones. Peasants' associations come under the regional administrative hierarchy. These hierarchies are in turn being progressively permeated by party (rather than state) officials. A similar process of centralisation and party penetration has taken place in other mass organisations such as the trade unions, and the women's and youth associations. Participation by women in leadership positions is almost entirely restricted to the women's associations, and to posts in the party structure concerned with women's affairs.

The second major institutional structure is the party, established under the guise of the Commission for Organising the Party of the Working People of Ethiopia (COPWE) from late 1979, and formally launched as the Workers' Party of Ethiopia (WPE) in September 1984. A vanguard party constructed on

strictly Leninist lines, this is straightforwardly directed from the top. Ritual references to the 'broad masses' barely disguise a political structure which is run by and in the interests of classes dependent on state employment. Government figures attest the small proportion of party members and party leaders who are either peasants or workers. But although emphatically a party of the state apparatus, it is not simply a party of the military. The Political Bureau includes several influential survivors of the group of civilian Marxist intellectuals who were prominent in the early years of the revolution, and as one moves down the party hierarchy, the proportion of military appointees steadily diminishes. For example, of the 30 regional party first secretaries announced late in 1988, 18 are former soldiers, while the great majority of the hundred or so provincial first secretaries are civilians. Most of these are former petty functionaries of the kind who take local level leadership positions in political parties throughout the continent, including schoolteachers, other technical agents of state administration such as health and agricultural employees, and some officials who have crossed the dividing line from the ordinary bureaucracy. Most of them found their way into active politics (some at a very early age) during the upheavals of the mid-1970s.

Party officials take the lead at every level in local administration. Political power in rural Africa is nothing if not visible: Who has the biggest office? Who gives the orders? Who demonstrates deference to whom? In Ethiopia, all of these signs point to the supremacy of the party, even when the provincial first secretary is a former teacher, and the provincial administrator (his counterpart in the state administration) is an ex-army officer. And though the real commitment of party officials to Marxist-Leninist dogma is something that they may well keep to themselves, they certainly have gone through an extensive programme of ideological and organisational training, either in the USSR and Eastern Europe, or in the ideological schools in Ethiopia itself. The total membership of the party was about 30,000 late in 1985, rather less than 0.1 per cent of the total national population, though it has since grown to probably about 80,000 members. Ordinary party members have been expected to take a leading role in implementing government policies such as agricultural resettlement (when groups of cadres were sent to set up special party units in resettlement zones), or villagisation and the establishment of agricultural producers' cooperatives (or collective farms). Many of those whom I have seen, especially in outlying rural areas, perform these tasks with considerable dedication.

Within the military, party officials form a distinct cadre. The former military men (almost all of whom were officers) who hold high positions in the WPE leadership went into politics from 1974 onwards, and

(except for the few who still hold military appointments) have long since dropped their military ranks and uniforms. Most of these were members of the Derg, though some (including several personal associates of Mengistu Haile-Maryam) have come in through other channels. Though they hold party positions, the survivors of the Derg are steadily declining in importance with each successive government reshuffle or organisational change, even when — like Melaku Teferre, the Derg's most brutal strongman and former party first secretary in Gonder — they are not dismissed altogether. Within the armed forces, distinct career patterns separate officers in command positions, from those in the party hierarchy which has developed from the former Military Political Administration of the Armed Forces. Though leading military commanders are members of the Central Committee of the WPE, this is no more than a titular recognition of their status, and their commitment to any form of Marxism-Leninism is sometimes paper-thin. This division between career officers and party officials within the military underlay the attempted coup d'état of May 1989, which was led by a group of senior military commanders.

The third leg of the new institutional structure is the military and the civil bureaucracy, vastly expanded in the case of the military from some 45,000 before the revolution to probably about 300,000 from the late 1970s onwards; some estimates of its current strength go as high as half a million. Despite the Somali war of 1977-78, these are, of course, overwhelmingly committed to the demands of internal control, at which in the later 1980s they have proved decreasingly effective. With the partial demobilisation of the peasant levies raised in the late 1970s, numbers have been kept up from the mid-1980s by a regular though selective process of conscription, which has proved increasingly difficult to enforce following successive disasters in the north.

The civilian bureaucracy has also expanded considerably. The only authoritative figures that I have been able to find show an increase from 109,322 to 167,860 between 1977-78 and 1982-83 in the number of civilian employees financed from the central government budget, an annual growth rate of some 9.5 per cent. Even though civil service salaries have remained unchanged (despite a high rate of inflation) since the revolution, this rate of increase is likely to have slowed in the later 1980s, owing to pressure on tax revenues. It excludes the large growth of employment in *kebelles* and peasants' associations, other mass organisations and state corporations. And along with the expansion of state regulatory power, 'breaches of regulations' (together with misappropriation of public property and 'crimes against the economy') have overtaken private offences such as assault and theft as the commonest category of crime.

The Economic Basis of State Power

This vast expansion in the institutional structure of the state was built on a productive base of (even for an African state) quite exceptional fragility. Ethiopia was, and remains, one of the poorest states in the world — on current World Bank figures, it is by some way *the* poorest.⁷ It has virtually no commercially exploitable minerals, and at the time of the revolution, when all foreign companies were nationalised without compensation, there were scarcely any companies of any importance to nationalise; the major American enterprise, for which compensation was later agreed at a mere US\$5 million, was Kalamazoo Spice, a buying agency for peasant-grown herbs and spices. The level of incorporation into the global economy was one of the lowest in Africa, with some 60 per cent of published exports coming from a single crop, coffee. And that this relative economic autonomy held no evident potential for indigenous economic growth was most starkly demonstrated by the predominance of a peasant mode of production barely able to assure its own subsistence, and vulnerable (as in Wollo and Tigray in 1973/4) to catastrophic famine.

Since the revolution, the whole of the economy (apart from some areas of petty trade) has been brought under state control. Industry is managed through state corporations, and small-scale and handicraft producers have been induced (though not formally compelled) to join together as cooperatives. Though compensation has been agreed for some of the foreign enterprises nationalised in 1974–75, the former management has not returned, and no new foreign businesses have been established. Trade in the commodities most important to government, notably grain and coffee, is closely controlled, and the regime has pursued a policy of voluntary agricultural collectivisation, aided by tax and other inducements. Peasants' association chairmen, for example, can be encouraged to form collectives, and thus gain both official favour and greater control over their own members. A formal structure of command planning was introduced in September 1984 (with the aid of a team of Soviet Gosplan advisors), though its implementation has been impeded both by the impracticability of the plan itself, and by the need to divert resources to meet crises such as famine.

Under the imperial regime, the revenue base of the state was derived largely from a small group of taxes on urban income and consumption. The subsistence sector was virtually untaxable, and even taxes on coffee exports accounted for no more than 6–7 per cent of total government revenues. The revolutionary

regime, however, both created and required a vastly greater capacity for surplus extraction, expressed in a rise in government tax revenues from 779.8 million birr in 1973–74 to 1996.6 million in 1982–83. Much of this increase came from the expropriation of the assets of the former economically dominant classes which after the revolution accrued to the state. By 1982–83, nearly 20 per cent of total government revenues came from 'profits, interest and rent', or in other words from nationalised businesses and urban houses. Direct taxes on trade also rose sharply, and the percentage of coffee export values retained by the producer dropped from an average of 62.3 per cent in 1960–74, to only 41.3 per cent in 1978–84. By far the greater part of the increase in government revenues came immediately after the revolution, in the form of a once-and-for-all rise in extractive capacity; thereafter, the rate of increase tailed off sharply, along with the economy from which the revenues were drawn. Although central government income from the subsistence sector remained at much the same low level (about 5 per cent) of total revenues after the revolution as before, actual exactions from the peasantry were increased by a variety of local demands and special levies, and also by the imposition of quotas for grain which peasants (especially in surplus producing areas) were required to sell at official prices to government buying agencies. The efficiency of the government's extractive apparatus was indicated by its ability to collect a high proportion of the taxes due even from badly famine-affected regions.⁸

All that this amounted to, however, was the expropriation of an increasing proportion of a diminishing surplus. The underlying level of per capita grain production declined steadily during the later 1970s and the 1980s, independently of the considerable fluctuations due to weather conditions and other local factors. So did the level of coffee and other export crop production (with the possible exception of the narcotic *chat*, which was exported largely to the Arabian peninsula), and stringent controls on internal trade and local consumption were needed to extract enough coffee from the domestic economy to meet Ethiopia's export quota under the International Coffee Agreement. Internal customs posts (a feature of Ethiopia's political economy before 1935) have been reintroduced to control trade in coffee, grain and contraband imported goods, and in the process to demonstrate the level of physical control which the government needs to police the economy. These revenues were used overwhelmingly for consumption purposes, and especially to maintain the military, which by 1988 accounted (on Mengistu Haile-Maryam's admission) for about half of government expenditure and 15 per

⁷ The World Bank, *World Development Report 1989* (Washington, 1989) p.164, gives Ethiopia's GNP per capita in 1987 as \$130, compared with \$150 for the next poorest state in the world; there are also a few states for which figures are not available.

⁸ This point is made in a recent paper, Adhana Haile Adhana, 'Peasant Response to Famine in Ethiopia 1975–1985', International Conference on Environmental Stress and Security, Stockholm, December 1988.

cent of gross domestic product.⁹ Such funds as remained for investment were disproportionately channelled into a small number of highly capitalised enterprises, with low rates of return, including the state farms and a few showpiece industrial projects built with Eastern European assistance.

A further critical aspect of revolutionary surplus expropriation is its geographical distribution. The economy that matters is concentrated almost entirely in the centre, south and west of the country, in areas that have remained under firm government control. The major coffee producing regions, notably Kaffa and Sidamo, are in the south-west. By far the greater part of surplus grain is grown in the three central regions of Shoa, Arsi and Gojjam, together with adjacent areas of northern Bale and Welega. *Chat* production is heavily concentrated in highland Hararge, while such industry as Ethiopia possesses is almost all in Addis Ababa, or strung out along the road and rail links south and east of the city. The areas of major insurgent activity, both in the north (Eritrea, Tigray, and northern Gonder and Wollo) and in the Ogaden, produce virtually no marketable surplus, and are also the regions most chronically short of food. The most important exception is the farming complex around Humera on the Sudanese border in north-west Gonder, where sesame seed cultivation expanded dynamically in the years immediately before the revolution. In the 1980s, however, even before Humera was lost to the government early in 1989, the state farms in the area, together with those in western Eritrea, were maintained at a substantial loss for symbolic purposes. Despite the enormous drain of resources to fight the wars in the north, the amount of direct damage that they have done to the sections of the economy required for state maintenance has therefore been surprisingly slight.

The Structure of Representation

The major impetus for revolutionary transformation comes from a massive expansion of popular participation in political life. People become involved in politics to an extent, and in ways, that were previously inconceivable. This has certainly occurred in Ethiopia, even though this participation is not free or democratic in any Western liberal sense of the words. The elections to institutions such as the National Shengo (or supreme soviet) established since 1987 under the constitution of the People's Democratic Republic of Ethiopia (PDRE) are very little more than a rubber-stamping of central nominations. Even within local level institutions such as *kebelles* and peasants' associations, the leadership (though drawn from local residents) is effectively put in place by

higher state or party officials. But nonetheless, the 'broad masses' (as they are usually termed) have been brought into politics through measures such as land reform and the abolition of private rented housing, through frequent meetings of *kebelles*, peasants' associations and other mass organisations, and through the expansion of education and literacy.

The central political problem for any revolutionary regime is to combine this increased level of participation with the requirements of state consolidation. At one level, this has been achieved in Ethiopia through the institutional structure already outlined. The draft constitution of the PDRE, for example, was discussed at meetings of *kebelles*, peasants' associations and other mass organisations throughout the country (and indeed abroad), and a number of amendments (none of which affected the basic provisions of the document) were made as a result. The most significant was the abandonment of a commitment to monogamy, in deference to Muslim wishes. At another level, that of formal state ideology, there seems to me to have been very little attempt to articulate any sophisticated application of Marxism to a society at Ethiopia's level of development. The inculcation of Marxism in schools and mass organisations is simplistic and mechanical, and constant invocation of the 'broad masses' substitutes in official rhetoric for any serious class analysis.

But by far the most critical area is the representation of ethnic or regional interests, commonly described as 'nationalities'. For the past century (precisely, since the emperor Menilek's accession in 1889), the political and geographical centre of Ethiopia has been in Shoa, a region of mixed Oromo, Amhara and other peoples, most of whose population is of Oromo origin, even though much of it is assimilated to Amhara language and culture. Many Shoans are ethnically unidentifiable. Given its ethnic heterogeneity, its geographical centrality, its dominance of the state, and its key position in the modern externally oriented economy, this Shoan core has had an evident interest in articulating a composite Ethiopian nationalism — just as, conversely, the regions to the north have developed their own peripheral nationalisms, in response to their increasing economic marginalisation and their distance from the new centres of political power. This Ethiopian nationalism has likewise — and equally understandably, in keeping with their own interests and mission — become deeply entrenched in central government institutions, and notably the armed forces.

The revolutionary leadership sought from the start, under the slogan *Ityopya tikkem* or Ethiopia First, to mobilise this composite nationalism as a source of popular unity, and to extend its appeal by removing elements of traditional political identity, such as adherence to Orthodox Christianity, which prevented

⁹ Mengistu Haile-Maryam, Speech to the 9th Session of the Central Committee of the WPE, 7 November 1988.

it from serving as a fully national symbol. This leadership was itself drawn from a wide variety of ethnic origins. The first chairman of the Provisional Military Administrative Council, Aman Andom, was Eritrean; the second, Teferi Benti, was a Shoan Oromo; Mengistu Haile-Maryam is generally regarded as of Wollamo origin, from Sidamo in the south; the former second-ranking member of the Derg and Vice-President, Fisseha Desta, is from Tigray; the third-ranking member and Prime Minister, Fikre-Selassie Wogderes, is a Shoan of indeterminate ethnicity from a largely Oromo area. Given this range of origins, as well as the regime's willingness to overthrow the previous structure of domination indicated by land reform, there is no reason to regard its commitment to an undifferentiated Ethiopian nationalism as merely the cover for 'Amhara domination' which it is frequently portrayed as by its opponents.

This nationalist commitment was allied to a Jacobin emphasis on centralisation. Apart from a brief period early in the revolution, when the Derg (under the influence of its then civilian ally, Meison) appointed governors of local origin to the major southern regions, its concern was almost exclusively with central control. Where, as in much of southern Ethiopia, the revolution brought evident benefits to the mass of the population by abolishing the previously exploitative structure of landholding, this centralisation was broadly acceptable, and enabled many areas of the country to be much more effectively incorporated into a national political structure than ever before. Where, as in Gonder or Tigray, land reform had little to offer a peasantry which already largely controlled its own means of production, and traditions of local autonomy were well entrenched, centralisation was catastrophically counterproductive. Regional representatives of the Derg, reacting repressively to what they saw as 'narrow nationalism', regional chauvinism, peasant backwardness or outright counterrevolutionary activity, succeeded only in driving large areas of the country into the arms of the opposition.

It is here worth emphasising the striking discrepancy between the charges of ethnic domination often brought against the Ethiopian central government, and the actual distribution of effective regional opposition to the regime. The areas of effective opposition — highland Eritrea, Tigray, northern Wollo and Gonder — are for the most part Orthodox Christian regions, inhabited by Tigrinya and even Amharic speaking peoples, which have been closely associated with the Ethiopian state since the earliest times; their people have been readily recruited to central government institutions (though in appreciably smaller numbers than the Shoans), and they have suffered little evident economic exploitation. The recently conquered regions of the south and west, on

the other hand, have been culturally far less closely attuned to the dominant group, have been subject to a vastly greater level of economic exploitation, and have been virtually excluded from central government office; yet attempts by Oromo and other opposition movements to mobilise ethnic identities against the central government have achieved nothing remotely approaching the success of the opposition movements in the north. It is economic marginalisation, not ethnic discrimination, that accounts for the 'national question' in modern Ethiopia.

Despite the high level of regional opposition, there is no reason to suppose that the regime has abandoned its centralist priorities. The constitution of the PDRE introduced in 1987, though it makes provision for 'autonomous regions' in addition to ordinary administrative regions, at the same time makes clear that Ethiopia is a unitary state, and both the powers and the boundaries of the regions can at any time be changed by the National Shengo in Addis Ababa. The WPE is likewise a unitary organisation, guided by the principles of democratic centralism, to which local party organs are subservient. I am not aware of any pronouncement by Mengistu Haile-Maryam, or anyone else in the top party leadership, indicating that local autonomy or the identities of individual nationalities are to be valued in themselves, rather than forced on the leadership in response to conditions that it cannot control.

Nonetheless, the central government has been obliged to make at least some formal concessions to demands for regional autonomy. From early in the revolution, the regime started broadcasting in other languages than Amharic; and from 1979 the national literacy campaign was conducted in 15 'nationality languages', even though its main function was to make people literate in Amharic. With the introduction of the PDRE, a formal structure of local government was created, which entailed an almost complete redrawing of the regional boundaries which had existed (with minor modifications) since the early 1940s. These boundaries were drawn up by a think-tank manned largely by academics, the Institute for the Study of Ethiopian Nationalities, which did its work with considerable sophistication. The areas inhabited by different peoples were carefully demarcated, and used (in conjunction with other criteria, such as transport networks) to create a set of 30 regions which corresponded as accurately as possible to the mosaic of Ethiopian nationalities.

These changes had an evident political rationale as well, in that by offering local peoples their own region, they could provide a counterweight to the demands of the various separatist movements. The Afar, a nomadic people scattered across the Red Sea plain, were offered an autonomous region drawn from Afar-inhabited areas of Eritrea, Tigray and Wollo, thus

denying the claims of the EPLF to an Eritrean state which followed the old Italian colonial boundaries. The remainder of Eritrea, which was accorded the status of an autonomous region with special powers, was subdivided into three subordinate administrative regions which broadly corresponded to the needs of ethnic representation, political allegiance, and strategic control. But the fact that these boundaries were redrawn late in 1988, in response to requests from a delegation claiming to represent the Muslim-dominated ELF, shows how the new regional structure could be altered at will from the centre. The Somali-inhabited areas were divided into different regions corresponding to the Issa clan (which has maintained a peaceful *modus vivendi* with the Ethiopian government), the Isaaq clans (which generally support the anti-Siyad SNM), and the Darod clans (which have most strongly supported the incorporation of the Somali-inhabited areas of Ethiopia into the Somali Republic). Peripheral peoples such as the Boran in the south, and the Anuak and Nuer in the Gambela salient on the Sudanese border, also gained regions of their own. The whole exercise indicated a political sensitivity such as the Ethiopian government has very rarely shown; and if Ethiopia under any regime is to have a structure of local government which roughly corresponds to its ethnic diversity, this demarcation has a good chance of providing it as any.

The problems lie in its implementation. Before the long process of reorganising local government had even started, it was postponed following the military disaster at Afabet in March 1988, while the government concentrated all its resources on stabilising the position in Eritrea — an apt commentary on the subordination of long term planning to desperate crisis management, which echoed the coincidence between the announcement of the Ten Year Plan and the famine crisis in September 1984. The names of the WPE first secretaries in the new regions were announced late in 1988, and indicated the contrasting priorities of representation and control. In some regions, such as the Afar autonomous region and Gambela, the new first secretaries were local men with previously very junior status in the party; neither was even an alternate member of the Central Committee. In regions such as Eritrea, Tigray and Ogaden, they were drawn from the senior political cadres of the armed forces, and had virtually no local standing at all. Elsewhere, there was a mixture; though several old Derg members remained, they were mostly assigned to regions with which they had some connection, while the number of civilians was increased. Had the new structure been introduced much earlier in the revolution, and at a time when there was general acquiescence with the basic goals of the regime, there would have been at least a chance that it might have provided an

acceptable balance between the demands of national unity and the recognition of regional diversity. Coming so late in the day, from a regime with an intense commitment to central control, its prospects are much more uncertain, even outside areas such as Tigray and Eritrea where simple lack of government control prevents its implication.

*

In Ethiopia, as in France, the Soviet Union, and the People's Republic of China, revolution has served as a means of centralising state power on the foundation provided by a decaying monarchy. The Ethiopian revolution has failed to live up to the example of those earlier revolutions, not because it has been too ruthlessly autocratic, but because (in a sense) it has proved unable to be autocratic enough. Despite an intense concern for political organisation, and a massive expansion in the apparatus of state power, it has been unable to surmount the limitations imposed, firstly by the extremely fragile and undeveloped economy on which the state is perched, and secondly by regional resistance movements which have become increasingly effective as the weaknesses of the central state have been exposed.

Much that the revolution has achieved has now been established beyond any serious possibility of reversal. Ethiopia has a highly effective structure of rural and urban government, and an equitable system of landholding. The educational system has been greatly expanded, and literacy vastly increased. Many of the reforms introduced by the central government have been adopted by the regional opposition movements in Eritrea and Tigray, which — trying to construct a similar political apparatus on a similar social base, and confronting much the same problems of military survival and decaying peasant agriculture — often resemble the regime which they oppose.

The regime's most basic failure, however, has been to see state power as the answer to all its problems. It has regarded the imposition of a centralised state and party structure as the solution to the problem of national unity, almost regardless of regional diversities which demand, at the very least, substantial opportunities for local autonomy. It has regarded a centrally directed economy as the only answer to the problem of development, almost regardless likewise of the demonstrable inefficiencies of state direction, especially in agriculture. The demands of revolutionary state consolidation have in turn required the constructions of a greatly expanded state apparatus on an economic base which is increasingly obviously unable to support it.

Whereas in much of sub-Saharan Africa, there has been a real problem of how to create effective political power, in Ethiopia the problem of power has thus been

one, not of how to create power, but rather of what can be done with it. It has been widely assumed in the Third World (and not just in Ethiopia) that the key to 'development' is the organisational capacity of the state. From this viewpoint, the essential task is to force the state as an effective power tool, characterised by hierarchy, discipline, honesty and efficiency, which can then be used in order to create prosperity, welfare, national unity, or whatever other goals are sought by the national leadership. This conception of the instrumental state is particularly intense in revolutionary situations, since it appeals very strongly to revolutionary elites, who look to state power as the means to implement their policies of social and economic transformation — an attitude encapsulated in the central role of the 'plan', through which the goals of the top leadership are (in a phrase constantly on the lips of the present Ethiopian ruling elite) 'transformed into deeds'. In Ethiopia, this attitude is reinforced by a long tradition of government from the top, which has scarcely been affected by a revolution whose function has been to transform the conditions of social and economic existence, rather than to replace a hierarchical by a more participatory form of government. Government in Ethiopia is a matter for experts who know what to do; the ignorant peasant, by contrast, is there to be organised, villagised, cooperativised, resettled, conscripted, taxed, or, in a word, governed.

There is no more dramatic symbol of the power of these mental constructs in shaping the way in which people live than the villages which have sprung up all over the Ethiopian countryside since 1985. Their identical houses laid out in ruler-straight lines, the placement of compounds, offices, even latrines, is strictly in accordance with the guidelines issued from Addis Ababa.¹⁰ The 'rationality' of the central plan is thus made to substitute for the converse rationality of peasant agriculture, under which homesteads had previously been scattered according to the dictates of shelter, drainage or proximity to resources such as fields and water.

The conjunction in Ethiopia of perhaps the most powerful indigenous state structure in Africa with probably its poorest economy, and the persistence of chronic problems of famine and civil war which appear to be well beyond the state's capacity to resolve, thus raise doubts about the appropriateness of the model of purposive state action as the motor for development which is shared, it would seem to me, by government and opposition movements alike. There are, of course, some goals which this model is well adapted to achieve, because they require the hierarchical organisation which it provides. The most

obvious of these is raising an army, and the mass mobilisation of 1977-78, which (quite as much as Soviet weapons or Cuban support) defeated the Somali invasion and contained the EPLF in Eritrea, remains one of the most dramatic achievements of the central regime. That the Ethiopian army has not been more effective in Eritrea must at least in part be due to the fact that it has been fighting an Eritrean revolutionary army which is every bit as well organised as itself, and has the further incentive of fighting for survival in its own territory. At a more mundane level, both government and opposition movements can achieve a high level of effectiveness in tasks such as literacy campaigns or relief aid distribution, which likewise depend on hierarchical organisation.

But there are two very basic problems which do not respond to management through centralised hierarchy, and these, uncoincidentally, are the two main failures of revolutionary Ethiopia. The first is the problem of meeting the aspirations of groups which cannot simply be incorporated into a homogenised nationalism, whether this nationalism be Ethiopian, or indeed Eritrean. The system is remarkably good at incorporating, on terms at any rate approaching equality, anyone who wishes to be fully assimilated into it. Even the government administration in Eritrea is very largely manned by indigenous Eritreans. But a government structure based on hierarchy is correspondingly weak at acknowledging any separate identity for groups which wish to maintain their own distinctiveness. Exactly the same problem has handicapped the resistance movements in Eritrea. The ELF's initial insistence on a Muslim (or even Arab) dimension to Eritrean nationalism inherently restricted its appeal to Christian Eritreans. The EPLF, in extending its appeal within a Marxist framework to Eritreans of all ethnic and religious persuasions, has been reluctant to acknowledge internal ethnic or religious qualifications to its own conception of a homogeneous Eritrean nationalism, and has thereby limited its capacity to gain support from groups, such as the Kunama and Afar, which have a distinct identity of their own.

The second is the problem of managing agrarian transformation, and especially of growing food. A classic deficiency of Leninist systems of government throughout the world, this would seem to stem, not so much from ideological objections to rural class formation (or kulakisation), as from the needs of central surplus expropriation. The measures such as cooperativisation and villagisation, which have been encouraged by the government ostensibly in order to promote a more efficient structure of agricultural production, in practice have as their main effect the concentration of production into a smaller number of larger units which are much easier to control than

¹⁰ J. M. Cohen and N. I. Isaksson, *Villagization in the Arsi Region of Ethiopia* (Uppsala, 1987) show an aerial photograph of a village, with the corresponding plan from the government guidelines; I have noted the same phenomenon while flying over Ethiopia.

scattered rural homesteads. There is no evidence at all that they actually promote more efficient production, let alone any increase in yields per hectare, and the available evidence for agricultural producers' cooperatives runs strongly in the contrary direction. The main function of cooperatives is, rather, indicated by the requirement that they sell their entire marketed output to the Agricultural Marketing Corporation at state-controlled prices. The role of the state farms in providing grain for government disposal is even more evident, as is their absorption of a very high proportion of the capital available for agricultural investment. This grain is in turn required to feed the cities and the army. The political imperatives of averting urban unrest and maintaining the apparatus of state control, oblige the government to pay prices to peasants which provide a strong disincentive to production. Agricultural production in the parts of Tigray and Eritrea controlled by the opposition movements has been disrupted by warfare, and these areas have normally had to import grain since long before the revolution; but there is little evidence to suggest that either the EPLF or the TPLF have achieved anything approaching the level of effectiveness in agricultural production that they have done in military organisation.

The key problem in each case is that the state cannot achieve its goals because success requires a devolution of decision-making, either to the local level or to the market, which challenges the Leninist model of the all-powerful party-state. In a broader sense, the intermediary institutions which the Ethiopian government has struggled so hard to create are not real intermediaries between state and people at all. They are mechanisms through which to express the superior wisdom of a government which, whether this wisdom derived from divine right or Marxism-Leninism, has had no real interest in establishing a dialogue with its own people.

The question of the level of regional or market autonomy which is compatible with a Leninist political structure is currently at issue throughout the socialist world, most dramatically in the Soviet Union itself; and the Ethiopian government (under strong

external pressure) has recently made some concessions on both counts, through the regional government reforms already discussed, and through the adoption of changes in agricultural marketing urged on it both by the World Bank, and by the team of Soviet Gosplan advisers attached to the Ethiopian planning office. There has, nonetheless, been no real sign of any willingness on the part of the Ethiopian government to relinquish the central control which constitutes the basic rationale for a Leninist political structure. It is indeed virtually inconceivable that any effective regional autonomy could be implemented while the present government headed by Mengistu Haile-Maryam remains in power; his ruthless suppression of all opposition has been such that none of the movements whose acceptance of autonomy is essential to its success would be likely to accept any role under his leadership.¹¹ The most recent attempt to open the way to negotiation with the separatist movements in the north, by removing Mengistu, ended in bloody failure in May 1989. Thus the impasse remains. But the underlying problem is one, not of personality, but of the adequacy of the model which Mengistu has come to embody.

Ali Mazrui once wrote that: 'The real danger posed by state socialism in a society with fragile institutions is not a danger of making the government too strong but the risk of making it more conspicuously ineffectual'.¹² The institutions of revolutionary government in Ethiopia are not fragile, and the government is conspicuously strong, but much of Mazrui's warning is still valid. In so starkly demonstrating its own limitations, it has delivered a severe and possibly terminal blow to the idea that the creation of a powerful state and party apparatus on broadly Leninist lines offers a plausible solution to the crisis of African development.

¹¹ At the time of writing, the first publicly acknowledged talks between the Ethiopian government and the EPLF are taking place; their outcome remains unclear.

¹² Ali Mazrui and M. Tidy, *Nationalism and New States in Africa* (London, 1984) p.294.